

Towards a Dutch Caribbean Knowledge and Expertise Network for Reparations and Healing

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In this position paper, I reflect on the unwavering need for a proper and long-term funded Dutch Caribbean Knowledge and Expertise Network for Reparations and Healing (DCKENRH) as presented in the Interinsular Consultation's 'Plea for recognition, apologies and reparations in the Caribbean part of the Kingdom' in May 2022. Since then, the Dutch State has offered apologies for its role in Atlantic slave trade, first by prime minister Rutte on December 19, 2022, and then by King Willem-Alexander on July 1st, 2023. This paper reiterates and substantiates our claim.

First, I reflect on the need for a DCKENRH in the light of the planned national (Dutch) Slavery Museum/Network in Amsterdam. Then I explore the state of non-governmental and governmental knowledge organizations in the Dutch Caribbean and their challenges for improved public service provision to the island communities. Thirdly I present a preliminary analysis of Strengths and Weaknesses, of Opportunities and Threats for the development of a Dutch Caribbean Knowledge and Expertise Network for Reparations and Healing. And finally, I float some final thoughts on the ownership, governance model and the funding required to create such a network. Along the way, I present three propositions to further capacity building and collaboration in the Dutch Caribbean knowledge arena.

A Dutch Caribbean Knowledge and Expertise Network

In advisory report *Chains of the Past* (p.7-8), the authors recommend creating a national museum or national facility for the commemoration of slavery: '*Provide a national museum center or national facility in which the history of slavery and its repercussions are shown in a comprehensive and accessible manner*'. *The authors continue: 'Ensure that this past can also be better known and displayed in the Caribbean countries and Suriname.'* This recommendation puts emphasis on the need for a national museum/ knowledge center as well as on the importance of knowledge dissemination in the Caribbean countries and Surinam. From a Caribbean perspective, three questions remain: first, does the 'national' character of the slavery museum include the island-specific perspectives on slavery and its repercussions on the public entities Bonaire, Saba, and St. Eustatius and if so, how can a museum/knowledge center situated in the metropole cater to the needs of the communities. Secondly, what is the intended future relationship with the autonomous countries of Aruba, Curaçao and St. Maarten and their institutions? Thirdly, how will the museum position itself towards the community(ies) in the sovereign Republic of Surinam? Additionally, and not insignificantly, one may ask which role Dutch Caribbean knowledge institutions themselves will fulfill in *knowledge dissemination and knowledge creation* concerning slavery and its aftermath in their island territories? That is, independently of institutions from the metropole.

To address these questions, the Interinsular Consultation advocated the establishment of a Dutch Caribbean Knowledge Network in its Plea (see appendix) as early as May 2022.

The working group advocates the establishment of an autonomous, contemporary-facilitated, generously, and sustainably budgeted Dutch Caribbean research center and knowledge network Slavery and Colonialism consisting of archives, universities, NGOs, museums, and libraries on the six islands. Its main objective will be to promote the reparations and healing of slavery and colonialism in the Dutch Caribbean countries and public entities through:

1. *conducting independent scientific research into the after-effects of slavery and colonialism on the six islands and in their regional and Kingdom networks, including archival research, oral history research, genealogical research and DNA research;*
2. *promoting social dialogue on slavery, colonialism, mental heritage and racism in the six islands;*
3. *establishing educational materials on the after-effects of slavery and colonialism;*
4. *promoting the safeguarding of tangible and intangible slavery-related heritage by governmental and non-governmental, local and international organizations;*
5. *supporting the annual commemoration of the abolition of slavery on the six Dutch Caribbean islands;*
6. *participating as an independent entity in future Kingdom consultations on the manner of the reparation policy to be developed, including the Kingdom Fund.*

The working group emphasizes that:

- *activities of the research center/knowledge network take place on the basis of needs articulation in and from the six islands;*
- *the costs associated with the establishment and activities of the research center will be financed from the Kingdom Fund in proportionality with those of the envisioned National Dutch Museum and Research Center (page 67);*
- *the research center will cooperate intensively with the National Dutch Slavery Museum and Research Center. Both institutions will be required to sign a cooperation protocol within 12 months after their formal establishment;*
- *the Dutch Caribbean research center/knowledge network operates at a distance from local and Kingdom governments. Researchers, developers, and administrators are bound by the Dutch Code of Conduct on Scientific Integrity (2018).*

The working group calls on Dutch and Caribbean governments to cooperate in the establishment of an independent Dutch Caribbean research institute as described in this plea and to allow the working group to participate in its preparations. (Translation, L.A.)

Since then, no concrete actions have been facilitated for the establishment of the Dutch Caribbean Knowledge Network. On the other hand, important steps towards the realization of the Dutch national museum were undertaken. The city council of Amsterdam, the Dutch Government and The Dutch Bank made a commitment for 20 to 30 million Euros for the National Slavery Museum. A planned 50 to 100 million Euro's will be required to realize the Dutch ambitions.

Three quartermasters were appointed to explore the realization of the national museum. Their visit to the Dutch Caribbean islands and Surinam in January 2023 did not result in concrete agreements or commitments concerning co-creation, co-ownership or shared decision which secured participation of the Dutch Caribbean communities and institutions in the museum. ⁽¹⁾ In their report to city council of Amsterdam, quartermasters Leerdam, Brandon & Brandwagt (2023) state: ‘... the museum’s programming begins throughout the Kingdom and continues until the official opening of the physical building’. It is not clear how voices from the Caribbean Island communities will contribute to the co-creation of the Amsterdam-based museum. The Caribbean questions mentioned above remain unanswered. The quartermasters (p. 4) realize that confidence in the Slavery Museum in initiative in Surinam and the six islands is still vulnerable. We understand that in early 2024 a follow up report will be presented in the Netherlands.

This brings me to a second recommendation. To avoid a ‘one-way exchange’ as was the case with Stichting Culturele Samenwerking (STICUSA) in the 1950s to 1980s, and in reference to point 3 from our Plea, it is recommendable to start a fundamental, non-Eurocentric dialogue between metropolitan and Caribbean stakeholders. Dialogue must clarify the yet unsolved ‘national’ character of the museum and the ambitions and the expectations concerning future working relation with the Dutch Caribbean knowledge network and island committees such as the Advisory Committee on Slavery, Atonement, and Reparations (ACSAR, St. Maarten), the Plataforma Sklabitut i Herensha di Sklabitut (Curaçao), the St. Eustatius African Burial Ground Alliance and similar organizations on the other islands and Surinam. From the European part of the Kingdom, the funding partners of the museum should take part in that discussion.

Institutions and operational capacities in Dutch Caribbean, mitigating scale

Metropolitan neglect of knowledge institutions is nothing new under the Caribbean sun. The editors of *Staat en Slavernij* (2023: 439) acknowledged this. Also, point 4 of Caricom’s Ten Point Plan for Reparatory Justice refers to the continued institutional inequality between European institutions and institutions in the Caribbean, ‘where the Crimes against Humanity were committed’.

- European nations have invested in the development of community institutions such as museums and research centers in order to prepare their citizens for an understanding of these Crimes against Humanity.
- These facilities serve to reinforce within the consciousness of their citizens an understanding of their role in history as rulers and change agents.
- There are no such institutions in the Caribbean where the Crimes against Humanity were committed. Caribbean schoolteachers and researchers do not have the same opportunities.
- Descendants of these Crimes against Humanity continue to suffer the disdain of having no relevant institutional systems through which their experience may be scientifically told. This crisis must be remedied within the CRJP.

¹ <https://www.amsterdam.nl/diversiteit/nationaal-slavernijmuseum/nieuwsbriefartikelen/buitenlandse-werkreis-hard-zoet/>

The Interinsular Consultation coined this recurring inequality as ‘institutional colonialism’: the continued (financial, ideological) dependency of institutions in the global south of partner institutions in the former metropolises. Processes of policy making, needs articulation, agenda setting, financing and budget control, knowledge production, project management and dissemination are controlled by metropolitan institutions. Structural unequal power inequalities are often legitimized by reference to scale, demographic, economic and financial limitations, academic maturity, accountability to European taxpayers, et cetera. Institutional colonialism is fueled by business models of knowledge institutes and career opportunities for scholars in the increasingly competitive institutional environment in the global north.

Small islandness is not a factor to be denied. The small island context and the notoriously poor state of public finances in Small Island Developing States further add to the competitive disadvantage of Caribbean institutions. Small island institutions lack ‘operational capacities’; the human and non-human resources that governmental and non-governmental institutions have at their disposal in order to provide the public services they are entrusted with (after Moore 1995). This structurally hampers the service delivery of both governmental and non-governmental organizations – government departments, foundations, associations, faith-based organizations, et cetera.

During the interuniversity research and capacity building project *Traveling Caribbean Heritage* (2017-2022), our research team conducted an analysis of governmental and non-governmental cultural heritage institutions in Aruba, Bonaire and Curaçao (Franken 2021). The key findings were that limited operational capacities hinder service provision and innovation processes of these institutions. I experienced this as volunteer-curator at the (non-governmental) *Fundacion Museo Aruba* between 2003 and 2013. We lacked funding beyond the point of bare survival. We had no paid academic researchers or museologists at our disposal, no educated educational staff, no trained guides, hardly any technical, administrative or pr staff. We lacked adequate storage facilities and a perspective for the maintenance of the government-owned, deteriorating historical building, Fort Zoutman, in which our museum was housed. Collaboration with local museums and museums on the sister islands were limited to incidental work visits. Projects with tourist organizations and schools were scarce and financially not sustainable. Uncertainty precluded long-term planning, innovation, and professionalization.

The *Traveling Caribbean Heritage* survey pointed out that numerous Dutch Caribbean cultural institutions were in an equally poor shape and to make things worse, the impacts of hurricane Irma in Sint Maarten (2017) and the worldwide Covid-19 pandemic (2020-2023) paralyzed the cultural heritage sector. Visitors stayed away, subsidies were halted, personnel were laid off, museums were temporarily or permanently closed (Allen, Alofs, De Geus and Smeulders 2021). Although the island economies revived, their heritage sector did not, at least not yet.

Not only NGOs are lacking operational capacities, but also governmental knowledge institutions struggle with underfunding, the lack of trained personnel, adequate housing,

et cetera. Research among the public libraries in Aruba, Bonaire, Curaçao, Saba and Sint Maarten, demonstrated that available resources hardly permit librarians to carry out core tasks. Means are lacking to invest in innovation. Ambitions are frustrated by the scarcity of operational capacities. Interisland or intra-Kingdom collaboration through networking, twinning and other forms of the sharing resources may contribute to the development of the sector, but this is not yet (sufficiently) taking shape (Alofs, Bant and Franken, 2022). Again, often due to the vicious circle of underfunding.

Because of poor public finances and a lack of priorities, the universities of Aruba, Curaçao and St. Martin, as well as the Aruba Teacher Training Institute (IPA) lack publicly funded research programs and consequently, depend on second and third stream, hence external, funding. However, Dutch, and European research programs are articulated, initiated, managed, and evaluated in Europe ⁽²⁾. By definition, small island universities lack resources and experience to compete with metropolitan institutions in competitive research calls, that, to make things worse, concern their islands' past, present and future. In practice, the competitive set-up of Dutch funded research calls creates division and mistrust within the small academic arena of the Caribbean. Funding agencies implicitly expect Caribbean universities to operate simultaneously as competitive and collaborative partners.

The strengthening and empowering of Dutch Caribbean academia through the Ducarp-initiative did not result in a process of self-steered strengthening of Dutch Caribbean knowledge institutions ⁽³⁾. Instead, it may likely result in the physical expansion of Dutch state institutions to the Caribbean islands. A sixfold repetition of the ineffective Caribbean Netherlands Science Institute (CNSI, established in St. Eustatius in 2014) is to be feared ⁽⁴⁾. Institutional colonialism in the making.

Therefore, a second proposition is to organize a conference to evaluate Dutch policies concerning institutional enhancement of Caribbean research, dissemination, and public value delivery. And more importantly a decolonial model for collaborative governance for research within the Kingdom.

Strengths and opportunities

The Caribbean Knowledge Network for Reparations and Healing cannot afford failure. The envisioned network stands for Dutch Caribbean self-steered academic research in support of reparatory and healing for the repercussions of transatlantic slavery in our territories. A profound understanding of multiple historical island realities and proper identification of potential for collaboration, must result in a joint research agenda and collaborative strategies

² <https://www.nwo.nl/onderzoeksprogrammas/caribisch-onderzoek-een-multidisciplinaire-benadering>

³ <https://open.overheid.nl/repository/ronl-a14244b2-a360-4459-921e-ee2aae49e84d/1/pdf/nld-adviesrapport-dutch-caribbean-research-platform-gecomprimeerd.pdf>

⁴ <https://www.rijksdienstcn.com/onderwijs-cultuur-wetenschap/hoger-onderwijs-en-wetenschap/caribbean-science-institute>

for the support of a Dutch Caribbean reparations and healing agenda. To accomplish this, the strengthening of resilient Caribbean knowledge institutions and the development of a Dutch Caribbean knowledge network of archives, museums, libraries, universities, monuments organizations and cultural organizations is key. These organizations operate in the service of descendants, their communities and grass roots organization.

Intra- and interisland collaborative networks can mitigate the limitations of small islandness. Interisland collaboration in for instance the Dutch Caribbean Nature Alliance ⁽⁵⁾, the Dutch Caribbean Heritage Platform ⁽⁶⁾, and of course also the Interinsular Consultation has proven to be successful. Similarly, the Kibrahacha project focusses on innovative teacher training programs; it is gaining ground on Aruba, Bonaire and Curaçao ⁽⁷⁾. In his contribution to this symposium, Scriwanek elaborates on the interisland archival collaboration since the demise of the Dutch Antilles in 2010. Hernandez and Scholing present a best practice of intersectoral collaboration between Aruban cultural knowledge institutions. Witsenburg (2021), director of the Aruban Monuments Bureau and one of the motors of the Dutch Caribbean Heritage Platform reflected on interisland collaboration in the field of monuments and (tangible and intangible) heritage. In my words: Sharing resources such as technology, knowledge, expertise, and experiences through interisland collaboration enlarges the operational capacities of individual institutions, enhances their professionalism and even add to their legitimacy, impact and acceptance within their island communities. However, the vision, patience and persistence of pioneers as front runners and driving forces are indispensable for long-term success. And so is proper funding.

Interisland collaboration is even more promising because of the already existing networks among professionals and the short communication lines within and between our islands. Smallness is (next to a threat also) a blessing and should be capitalized as such. Additionally, a shared past resulted in similar legal, institutional and policy frameworks and governance models for many of our governmental and nongovernmental organizations. This makes collaboration easier for all (Alofs & Veneman 2010). Creating networks and strengthening island institutions may even contribute to a reversal of the brain drain of young Caribbean professionals (Groot et.al 2014). Once local institutions can offer employment and a future for their families, a new generation of professionals may come back home.

Weaknesses and threats

In the context of the implementation of the 2003 UNESCO convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH), initiatives were undertaken to create an Dutch Caribbean platform of National UNESCO Committees. Again, the purpose of this interisland collaboration was to exchange resources and promote mutual support (Ansano & Timmers 2018). However, after government changes on several of our islands, the plans were delayed, postponed and as I understand, after some dormant years, revived. Synchronicity is an issue

⁵ <https://dcnanature.org/>

⁶ <https://www.monumentenfondsaruba.com/2842-2/>

⁷ <https://kibrahacha.org/>

in any multi-island context (or a multi-partner jurisdiction such as the Kingdom of the Netherlands). Islands are ecosystems with their own dynamics and speeds. This backfires easily on the continuity of long-term collaboration. The ICH case offers a lesson in dealing with weaknesses and threats.

The lesson learned may be as follows. Small islandness is not a factor to be denied or ridiculed, but one to work and deal with, first and foremost by islanders themselves. Interisland collaborative networks should be organized with a clear distance from local and Kingdom governments to guarantee their independence and sustainability. Insularism and the appeal of short-term gains for individuals and organizations are as threatening as the neocolonial reflexes from the metropole. This symposium offers the environment and the moment to acknowledge, confront and overcome these threats and limitations. Despite the disintegration of the Dutch Antilles, we still have a lot in common. The future, for instance.

Final thoughts: unite, invite, invest

Existing contacts between Dutch Caribbean universities, archives, museums, libraries, monuments organizations and cultural institutions provide the foundation of innovative, emancipatory, and sustainable knowledge network for reparations and healing. Island committees on slavery, reparations and healing should be facilitated to create bonds beyond the boundaries of islandness and fragmentation. Additionally, partners from the European part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands are sympathetic towards scientific emancipation of Dutch Caribbean knowledge institutions and expressed their willingness to form partnerships.

The Interinsular Consultation has laid its claim: *wij willen de regie*, we will be in charge. Small island societies can simultaneously achieve shared goals and realize their individual unique goals by collaboration and mutual respect and support. Investing in a Dutch Caribbean Network for Reparations and Healing, must be ambitious and include at least the following:

- Invest in Dutch Caribbean institutions and their operational capacities;
- Invest in a network, not a center, to avoid centralist reflexes;
- Invest in a shared and diverse, yet inclusive community-driven research agenda for the support of reparations and healing on our islands;
- Define a legal status and governance model that secures academic independence and continuity;
- Invest in long-term funding ‘*in reasonableness and proportionality with those of the envisioned National Dutch Museum and Research Center*’.

The third and final proposition resulting from this paper is to facilitate a Dutch Caribbean working group to explore the possibilities and modalities to arrive at the establishment of such an interisland knowledge network for the support of reparations and healing in our territories. As my Pan- Caribbean friend Mo says, *Corporation knows winners and competition creates losers*.

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